



People-First Language

The way a society refers to persons with disabilities shapes its beliefs and ideas about them. Using appropriate terms can foster positive attitudes about persons with disabilities. By using “people-first” language, the person, not the disability, is emphasized. For example, say “people with disabilities” instead of “the disabled.”

If you don’t know the appropriate words to use, simply ask the person what they prefer. Following is a chart of some examples of people-first language.

Labels Not to Use	People-first Language
The handicapped or disabled	People with disabilities
The mentally retarded	People with mental retardation
He’s retarded	He has a cognitive disability
My son is autistic	My son has autism
She’s a Downs kid, a mongoloid	She has Down syndrome
He’s learning disabled	He has a learning disability
She’s crippled	She has a physical disability
He’s a dwarf (or midget)	He’s short of stature or he’s short
She’s emotionally disturbed	She has an emotional disability
He’s wheelchair bound or confined to a wheelchair	He uses a wheelchair
Normal and/or healthy kids	Typical kids or kids without disabilities
He’s in special ed	He receives special ed services or additional support services
Handicapped parking, bathrooms, etc.	Accessible parking, bathrooms, etc.
She has a problem with...	She has a need for...

Source: *Tips and Strategies to Promote Accessible Communication*, North Carolina Office on Disability and Health with Woodward Communications, ©1999.